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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000450

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TAGS: PGOV PREL BA BILAT POL

SUBJECT: NDI STAFF VISIT OUTLINES WAY FORWARD FOR
PROGRAMMING IN BAHRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶11. (C) Two representatives from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) visited Bahrain May 10-15 and met with a wide range of government officials, parliamentarians, and civil society representatives to discuss the resumption of NDI activities in Bahrain. NDI staff outlined their intention to focus their work on the institutions of parliament. The overarching message from the GOB to NDI was that the door was open to NDI's return, but there needs to be cooperation with the Bahrain Institute for Political Development (BIPD) and its leadership. BIPD officials agreed to move forward in collaboration on a fall program, and chose to defer on whether the development of a formal MOU between the two organizations was necessary. NDI also conveyed to the Minister of Social Development a desire to work with youth societies on activities related to civic responsibility in a democracy. Post is cautiously optimistic about NDI's plan to move forward, but NDI will need to guard against being subsumed by BIPD, thereby losing independence, and potentially credibility, in the eyes of NDI's long-time supporters. In the coming weeks, the Ambassador will stress to senior leadership the importance of taking advantage of this very reasonable NDI plan of action (in a way that allows NDI to operate without compromising its independence), thereby removing a negative element that has been hanging over an otherwise very positive bilateral relationship. End summary.

Focus on Parliament

¶12. (C) NDI country project director Scott Bates and regional program director Leigh Catherine Miles visited Bahrain May 10-15 to discuss NDI resuming its work in Bahrain. Meeting with three government ministers (Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Justice and Islamic Affairs, and Social Development), the heads of the two chambers of parliament (the elected Council of Representatives (COR) and the appointed Shura Council), individual MPs, and leadership of BIPD, NDI outlined its intent to focus its work on the two chambers of parliament as institutions, rather than on political party development, as NDI had done prior to its departure in May 2006. NDI proposed programming on topics such as executive/legislative branch relations, MP interactions with the media, building the capacity of COR and Shura technical staff, and legislative drafting, among other areas. Per a conversation on May 10 with Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs Shaikh Khalid Bin Ali Al Khalifa, since

NDI would not target political societies in its programming, legal restrictions preventing political societies from receiving "benefits" from outside organizations would not apply to NDI's work with members of parliament.

Cooperation with BIPD, UNDP

¶ 13. (C) In discussions May 14, BIPD Secretary General Lulwa Al Awadhi and Executive Director Dr. Abdulla Al Asha'al welcomed NDI collaboration with BIPD on programs for the parliament. They were quick to raise the issue of establishing an MOU, but Bates suggested that the two organizations conduct a joint activity in October or November to build goodwill, and then they could sit down to discuss the possibility of drafting an MOU. This idea was agreeable to Al Awadhi and Al Asha'al. They also suggested that NDI help build the capacity of BIPD staff and support a certificate program in political studies BIPD is developing that will commence in September. The importance of cooperation with BIPD was echoed clearly by both heads of the parliamentary chambers May 15, saying that the institutions would work with NDI as long as programming was conducted with BIPD.

¶ 14. (C) In a follow up discussion May 15 on BIPD programming, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) program analyst Mohamed Al Sharif outlined the extent of UNDP's involvement with BIPD. UNDP, under an MOU with BIPD, has become BIPD's primary partner and provider of content for BIPD activities. Al Sharif mentioned that other countries, such as France and the UK, had approached UNDP with offers to provide programming for the parliament. Al Sharif suggested that NDI and UNDP share work plans and maintain close collaboration so

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that programming was not duplicated and would be complementary. Bates described a successful model he had seen in Kosovo in which a committee of content providers met regularly with an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) official, who coordinated parliamentary programs conducted by various partners.

Work with Youth

¶ 15. (C) In their meeting May 14 with Minister of Social Development Dr. Fatima Al Balushi, Bates and Miles outlined NDI's plans to work with youth organizations through a series of "dialogues" on various subjects related to civic responsibility in a democracy. (Note: In addition to the MEPI grant that will fund the parliamentary activities, NDI has a second National Endowment for Democracy grant that it will use for its programs with youth.) Al Balushi indicated that the Ministry welcomed cooperation and would be happy "to have its lawyers sit down with NDI officials to work out an MOU." Following the meeting, Bates commented on the bureaucratic hurdles, saying it might be preferable to maintain the status quo in their activities with youth, whereby NDI reimburses program costs as the organizations conduct activities.

Comment

¶ 16. (C) This visit by NDI representatives may have resulted in a reasonable framework in which NDI programming can return to Bahrain. NDI's strategy to focus its efforts on parliamentary institutions and its members through periodic visits and programs, rather than establishing a permanent presence and working with political societies, has seemingly relieved some Bahraini officials and has received a positive welcome. At the same time, it was striking that both heads

of parliamentary chambers stressed the importance of working in conjunction with BIPD. The outstanding question is whether BIPD will be content to have NDI work "with" it, or insist that it work "through" it. We are cautiously optimistic that NDI, in initiating new programming with the parliament will be able to work "with" BIPD in a way that does not compromise its independence and its ability to work directly with parliamentarians. In upcoming meetings with senior leadership, the Ambassador will stress that NDI has come up with a reasonable plan of action to resume operation in Bahrain, and that the government should seize the opportunity to support this plan, allow NDI to come back, and remove a negative element that has been hanging over the otherwise very positive bilateral relationship.

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